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ABSTRACT

The goal of the instructor in a communication skills course is to improve the student's ability to communicate. The public speaking course at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee is important to the Communication Department and to the university--every college except Fine Arts and Letters and Science requires a passing grade in this course for admission. The most beneficial outcome for the student occurs when the instructor finds a method of reducing the anxiety so that instruction, application, and practice is conducted in an atmosphere and with an attitude of confidence. However, when explicit efforts are undertaken to reduce anxiety felt about communication events, they may produce a variety of outcomes. The field has techniques with proven effectiveness at lowering levels of anxiety that need to be used, and at the same time the implications of such changes need to be examined. The key to ethical instruction is to find some basis for action that promotes healthy communication and protects both faculty and students. (Author/NKA)

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CONSIDERING ETHICAL DECISIONS IN AN APPREHENSIVE WORLD

by

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ABSTRACT

CONSIDERING ETHICAL DECISIONS IN AN APPRHENSIVE WORLD

The goal of the instructor in a communication skills course is to improve the ability of the student to communicate. However, when explicit efforts are undertaken to reduce anxiety felt about communication events, these may produce a variety of outcomes. The field has techniques with proven effectiveness at lowering levels of anxiety we need to use those and at the same time find out the implications of such changes.

This Spring I inherited the directorship of the Public Speaking course at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The former director, Jack Johnson, became the Letters and Science Associate Dean and left the department for warmer and better compensated environs. I will not comment on the normal internal departmental issues that go with any administrative reassignment but it became apparent the responsibility would be mine to assume this role (I still think that the lottery was rigged). Jack's legacy is a difficult one to step into, he was named teacher of the year for his efforts in this course and had built a multimedia main lecture with well trained lab leaders (TA's) combined with a rigorous method of assessment and instruction. The course maintains an average grade point average around 2.10 while the teaching evaluations typically are 4.20 (out of a five point scale). The students find the course difficult but evaluate positively the method of instruction.

As a researcher, a great part of my time has been spent dealing with one of the most fundamental issues in any public communication skills course. How to deal with the apprehension or fear that a person feels about engaging in a public presentation. This fear is heightened when the presentation is accompanied by some type of evaluation by the listeners. One is not simply presenting or speaking, but the act carries with it some method of assessment and ultimately impacts on an important outcome for the speaker. Fortunately, if I (more importantly,

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the teaching assistants in the labs) do a competent job, the effort will reduce the anxiety a person feels (Allen, 1989; Allen, Hunter, & Donohue, 1989). Simply training a person to communicate not only improves competence but also diminishes the anxiety they feel about communication. If you know you are competent at something, then the basis of the anxiety is reduced. Why be anxious about those events at which you will succeed.

In the past I had directed a multi-section public speaking course involving the use of teaching assistants, so I was not totally unprepared for the insanity of the process. The difference was that I had a greater understanding and appreciation for the problems of dealing with the apprehensive student. My view was that apprehension creates a barrier to effective instruction, particularly for a performance course. This view is supported by two separate meta-analytic summaries of relevant literature (Allen & Bourhis, 1996; Bourhis & Allen, 1992). The goal for the most beneficial outcome for the student is to find a method of reducing the anxiety so that instruction, application, and practice is conducted in an atmosphere and with an attitude of confidence. The goal is not to generate hubris, or a false bravado, but rather an orientation of positive and assertive approaches to the task of public communication. The critical view, in my opinion, is not to deny the feelings of anxiety (virtually all speakers will experience those attacks)

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but rather to find functional methods of handling the feelings that is productive

The public speaking course at UWM is important to the department and the university. Every college with the exception of Fine Arts and Letters and Science requires this a passing grade in this course for admission. Obviously, the professional colleges (all non L&S Colleges are considered professional schools) considered competent communication a prerequisite skill for success. The problem with this assessment is that the Public speaking course's importance heightens the evaluative nature of the process. The students know that failure in this course will keep them out of education or business. The impact is to increase the stress and focus on the evaluative nature of the experience. For persons experiencing a high level of apprehension, this increases the barrier to performance by increasing the anxiety the student experiences. Unfortunately, the anxiety felt is rational and expected, a person should be anxious about an experience that has long term impact on their career and personal objectives.

The paradox created is that as we, as educators, scientists, and academics, prove the need for competence, we increase the justification for anxiety. The stronger the case we make for the impact of what we are about, the more we justify and heighten the sense of anxiety towards the experience. At the same time, we

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recognize that the very emphasis and importance attached to the event becomes the same source of the inability to be successful.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of the importance of communication apprehension to an individual. The next section considers how changing communication anxiety impacts on lives. The following section considers the ethics and implications of such a change and whether a warning label should be required. The final two sections deal with answers to ethical issues in general and suggestions for our methods. The goal of the presentation is to provoke thought and discussion rather than to provide answers.

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION IS IMPORTANT

This may seem unnecessary to state, but it bears repeating that communication apprehension impacts on the life of the person. The choice of occupation, lifepartners, classes, and other features of a persons existence are sometimes tied up with the level of apprehension they feel about communicating. We seem to feel that anxiety about communication is instrumental or central to the interrelationships that a person has with others. These relationships extend across the typical venues of communication: interpersonal, group, relational, organizational, an public. While evidence exists of independence between these venues (Levine & McCroskey, 1990), the underlying connections should not be missed either. We do have a variety of communication situations that generate anxiety.

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Basically this position is nothing new, if you are a scholar dealing with communication apprehension at any level it is easy to understand the importance of the anxiety. More importantly, anyone can understand how the anxiety manifests itself in all aspects of a person's existence.

Anxiety is an emotional reaction to a situation. The result of the anxiety is the structuring on the environment to avoid those situations that provoke the reaction. The result is the "avoidance" of situations and relationships that would generate the anxiety. As the anxiety impacts on the choices that the individual makes in his or her life, certain options are foreclosed and others become more attractive. The result is some type of lifestyle and the associated environmental structuring that goes along with all the choices.

CHANGING APPREHENSION CHANGES LIVES

This is an argument by inference or logic rather than an argument through empirical data. The great problem is that while we know that there exist various successful methods of reducing communication anxiety, we do not, as yet, have data that evaluate the impact of those changes on the person. The assumption previously held was that the anxiety was creating a need on the part of the person to structure the environment in a particular way to avoid the anxiety producing situations.

Remove the cause, and change will follow. This assumes that the current environment is dissatisfactory, if the person is

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happy, no change will take place. The person will find a way of creating a environment without reduced anxiety, or will find the world very unpleasant. This suggests the need for an entire new set of research that is longitudinal and examines the long term impact of the change. Does the change enrich the life of the person in the manner that we believe? The goal ought to be not simply diminishing anxiety, but real improvement in the lives of the students that we work with.

This motivational understanding is important. A person seeks out communication courses in order to achieve some goal, to change. All education is about change, college education is not mandatory, and our students can choose among many routes. They however when making a choice seek a particular personal, professional, and other outcomes.

ARE WARNING LABELS REQUIRED

If communication apprehension is an important factor in a person's life. If our courses are designed to change that, should we warn the students that the intent of the course is to change the way in which they are structured the world.

It is easy to say that a person will be a better communicator. That is why we teach the skills courses, we wish to improve the skill of the student. However, we also teacn attitudes towards communication and we do so in order to improve skills. However, the ancillary changes that a person has should

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ripple throughout the rest of the life of the student. The student will go through a number of transitions.

Should we warn students about the issues that they may face in the life after the changing attitude toward communication? More importantly, do we provide a list of the benefits as well. The issue appears interesting since the goal of education is change.

ANSWERING THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES

The first comment I would make is that the student seeks the change. The potential business student seeks out to become a better communicator because of the belief that this skill will contribute to success. The process of education is one of change, the student wants change. We have a responsibility to the student's desires even if they may not always seem entirely the best for the person. The decision to change is the responsibility of the student and we, as professionals, should respect that. The goal of education should be the empowerment of the student to bring about changes in themselves and the world around them. We need to work at establishing that power.

The second issue is that we perhaps overvalue ourselves. College often takes a person far from home, away from family and friends into an environment unfamiliar and unknown. To say that a slight improvement in a few select communication skills has more impact than the other forces at work in the person's life appears laughable. The training in communication anxiety

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reduction, may create a generalizable skill that transcends simply the public speaking setting. The unanswered question is whether such skills (skill at handling feelings of anxiety) become transferred between communication events.

WATCHING OUT FOR OUR METHODS

I am not a counselor, nor do I play one on television. My aims and ambitions are much more modest and unfortunately a lot less overwhelming. My goal is to provide a sense of empowerment through the techniques with which I am familiar and consistent with my training. I am not a member of the American Psychological Association, never had it, probably never will. My professional identity and affiliation is found elsewhere. That is not to say I am not sympathetic to the ethical and other competence standards of that association. However, I do not feel bound by the standards anymore than members of APA probably feel the need to meet NCA standards for practice.

Classrooms, at least those I have considered educational, are not places for therapy. Most instructors are not trained for it, and most of the other students are frankly uninterested. We need to keep things on focus and on topic. The focus needs to consider how changes in the student increase the educational value of the setting, the improvement is undertaken to increase educational outcomes not personal lifestyle issues.

My own reaction comes from several diversity training and "classroom empowerment" workshops. We were encouraged to talk

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about our personal lives as examples of various issues. After the second woman described how she had been raped, I found myself confused. I had not come expecting a therapy group. It was difficult to understand how this material would permit me to teach public speaking to pre-business majors or become more effective in teaching quantitative research methods. We need to exercise a sense of control over the process, to not only protect ourselves but the students deserve protection from their own excesses and need to self-disclose.

I thought that this was strange and would never occur in a classroom or be related to public speaking. Then Steven Booth-Butterfield related an incident where a student has attributed her anxiety about speaking to being molested as a child. He stopped her and recommended she seek professional and trained assistance. Now, notice that he did not deny her attribution or question her authenticity. What he did was, in my opinion, the correct thing, get her to help that would be effective and appropriate. Such an action is ethical and such a response should be a standard one that persons in communication departments should provide.

I am a bit concerned about anyone for example that would start hooking up people to biofeedback equipment. While I think a person with training should use such approaches, I do not forsee this becoming the wave of the future. But given the increase in computer technology and the link to various

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electronic capabilities, I would not be surprised if the availability of the technique increases and the application is made to various forms of diagnosing and dealing with various problems related to human physiology. Typically, psychological studies seek to find a phobia easily accessible for testing of new equipment and therapies. Public speaking anxiety has found use because the phobia is easily diagnosed and such a large percentage of the population suffers from this. Combined with little risk of harm to the participant it is no surprise that the content of the procedures rely on public speaking anxiety as the basis for testing.

A *Wall Street Journal* article appeared where a Madison based therapist was recommending the use of depressants as a means of improving public speaking anxiety. I am not questioning the effectiveness of the procedure, but as a Ph.D and not an M.D., I am not going to start recommending to my students (patients) that they seek a physiological method of reducing anxiety. I have to admit that this would increase the number of practice speeches that a number of my students would give. Looking out to a crowd of over 300 for the main lecture, the drugs reducing physiological response could have little effect on the reactions I typically receive.

My current research in on the causes and consequences as well as cures to social competence. A strong case can be made that there is link between a lack of social competence and

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aggressive, violent, anti-social behavior by both men and women. For men the inability to act appropriately in social situations may increase the risk of rape. For women, the lack of social competence may increase the risk of suicide and other self destructive acts. While such possibilities exist as more than theoretical, a lot of data has been collected, the ability to provide preventive measures also exist. A number of programs exist for training in social competence of at risk persons have been tried and tested. I am not sure what part communication scholars should play in the implementation of these programs, if any. While clearly the issues surrounding communicative competence are part of our discipline, the training sessions resemble more therapy than education. At the current time, our field is ill-equipped by training and practice to participate on a sound basis. This suggests another agenda to pursue.

We need to be vigilant without being paranoid. Most techniques we use are self induced like visualization, systematic desensitization, and cognitive modification. We essentially provide a regimen or a script for the person to implement, a form of checklist to prepare for the event. This is not meant to imply a deep examination of the student or the need for a kind of personal interaction with the student requiring self-disclosure of a personal or intimate nature.

CONCLUSIONS

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The largest element that I am advancing is a sense of being reasonable and prudent. At the same time we need to monitor what we are doing. The goal of panels like this one is to explore ideas with the aim of building a sense of consensus. Eventually, the field will find agreement on methods that do and do not work. The long term prognosis is that we will develop some methods for handling the reduction of communication anxiety. As we begin to develop understanding the natural desire to maximize outcomes for our students will lead to improved practice by capitalizing on research findings. We have no need at this time of certification, licensing, or some sense of policing or enforcement. Frankly, our knowledge of the technology and the necessary or expected outcomes is so poor little could be done. But additional research and subsequent meta-analyses promise the possibility of changing this.

The problem that we have is that communication is important and fear about communication the number one phobia in the country. The result is room for growth in revenue as persons interested in the bottomline of cash not education may find focus in our area. What we need to provide, down the line, is a set of guidelines or expectations for reasonable practice. If the medical doctor in Madison becomes the standard, we could see our job transformed into pushing drugs rather than providing advice and training.

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Do we need guidelines? Not yet, I do think that we probably would serve the community with a simple affirmative declaration of principles. The kind of principles that would serve as a foundation for ethical practice. The key is to find some basis for action that promotes healthy communication and protects both faculty and students. This is not a call for radical action or attempts to transform the basis tenets of the community. Instead, I am asking for a discussion of these issues and eventually the formation of a consensus that serves as a guide for action.

This paper is merely a collection of some possibilities and thoughts that we need to consider about various issues. I do not suggest that I have the solutions to the various problems that exist with the treatment of communication anxieties (and I have not even addressed issues like receiver apprehension, written apprehension, to name a few). We need to expand and sharpen our vision to be useful, we need to target our research and think through our partnership and role in the coming years. We have important contributions to make as we expand our importance.

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